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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENGDU 000189

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON SOCI CH

SUBJECT: TIBET: MANY INTERNATIONAL NGOS FORCED OUT SINCE 3/08

REF: A) CHENGDU 184, B) 08 CHENGDU 061

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CLASSIFIED BY: David E. Brown, Consul General.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) This is the second of two reports on the current situation faced by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), following Chengdu 184. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Beijing.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Since March 2008, TAR officials have forced the closure of most INGOs -- and the downsizing of some of those still there -- reducing the number still active in the TAR from approximately 25 to around half a dozen. Officials typically have imposed indirect or passive sanctions, simply letting memorandums of understanding (MOUs) expire or refusing to renew residence permits for foreign staff with local experience or Tibetan language skills. Most affected are small organizations, such as One HEART Foundation, while better connected larger organizations such as Save the Children UK continue their work. INGOs long established in the TAR are also feeling the heat. The Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) is being pushed out; sources indicate that The Bridge Fund is being gradually distanced from its implementing partners. INGO operations in the TAR, always difficult, are now being pared down by TAR officials to a few organizations with which they are more comfortable. End Summary.

International NGOs: Increasingly Unwelcome in the TAR

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¶3. (C) In recent conversations, contacts from INGOs that currently or previously worked in the TAR have consistently reported that local officials' actions have dramatically reduced their presence there since March 2008, when widespread protests broke out across Tibetan regions of China. A small British health organization that worked in the TAR for nearly a decade before its projects there were shut down in 2006, and retains contact with many organizations working on TAR issues, reported that of approximately 25 INGOs that previously participated in monthly coordination meetings in Lhasa, "less than five" are left. A Tibetan employee of Save the Children UK in Lhasa confirmed to PolEconoff in August that "many" international NGOs have been shut down over the last year. TPAF's Country Director told the Consul General in late July that most foreign INGO

staff, particularly those with Tibetan language skills, have been forced out (ref A).

¶4. (C) Asked whether local NGOs are stepping in to fill gaps left by the departing international ones, a local employee of Save the Children UK's Lhasa office said that there are almost no homegrown NGOs in the TAR. This is consistent with Post's information -- we know of only one domestic NGO, the TAR Exploration Association, which appears to operate more as a government organized NGO (GONGO). We have heard that there may be some very small unregistered local NGOs operating out of monasteries in the TAR's Chamdo prefecture, near the border with Sichuan province, but we have not been able to obtain further information on these. (Note: Obtaining complete information on civil society in the TAR is complicated by our limited access to the area, lack of comprehensive coordination mechanisms among the organizations, and many organizations' reluctance to share information, both due to the sensitivity of their operational environment and competition among them. End Note.)

#### Indirect Measures Force Organizations Out

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¶5. (C) TAR officials have rarely, if ever, directly told INGOS they are to be shut down. Rather, they have employed a range of indirect measures to push organizations out. One HEART Foundation's U.S. office contacted Consulate Chengdu in late June to report that they were being denied permission to continue their work in the TAR. We later learned that their MOU with the TAR Health Bureau expired in June and has not been renewed. As of July, contacts familiar with the organization's situation told us they were still renting office space in Lhasa,

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but it was unclear whether they would retain it once the lease ran out. (Note: A September 2 article in a local U.S. paper, 'The Idaho Mountain Express,' carried the headline "One HEART Foundation no longer working in Tibet: Maternal health care mission was victim of NGO crackdown in China." End Note.)

¶6. (C) Contacts also recently told Consulate Chengdu's ethnic Tibetan locally engaged staff (LES) that Terma, another small INGO providing tuberculosis treatment to poor Tibetans, has recently had to shut down their Lhasa office for unspecified reasons. As reported in ref A, and echoed by other contacts, international staff with longer experience on the ground and/or Tibetan language ability have also found themselves, on an individual basis, increasingly pushed out. Save the Children UK's employee in Lhasa told PolEconOff that they are now on their third international advisor within the last year, in contrast to previous advisors who each stayed for a year or more at a time.

#### Small Organizations Taking Brunt, Some Large Ones Remain

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¶7. (C) Smaller and lesser known organizations have taken the brunt of official ire to date. Larger, better known organizations, such as Save the Children UK and Heifer International, retain a presence on the ground and expect to continue their work into the foreseeable future despite some increased operational challenges. These organizations have

extensive experience working with local officials, implement projects closely aligned with local government-supported programs, and avoid more sensitive issues. Heifer Country Director Chen Taiyong recently told PolEconOff that they have not encountered restrictions in accessing their Tibetan area projects, including those in the TAR, and said he believes that their all-Chinese national staff has been key in making this possible. He noted, however, that TAR officials denied a request they made to meet with The Bridge Fund (whose situation is further discussed below) during a visit planned for this month by headquarter staff to the TAR. (Note: Heifer's close relationships with local authorities, cultivated over two decades of work in China, has earned it a reputation among some within civil society as falling more into the GONGO category. End Note.) We understand that Handicap International and the World Wildlife Fund also remain on the ground in the TAR.

#### Established Organizations Also Feeling the Heat

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¶8. (C) Long-established INGOs whose relationship with TAR officialdom has been more ambivalent or adversarial have faced increasing pressure, despite their higher profile. TPAF, previously optimistic that they would be able to remain in the TAR, reports it is now being pushed out (ref A). According to some reports, the Trace Foundation, run by George Soros' daughter Andrea Soros, retains its Lhasa operations, but is limited in its activities and is only able to continue a scholarship program for Tibetan students.

¶9. (C) The Bridge Fund (TBF) still has an office in Lhasa, but it appears may be increasingly cut off from its implementing partner organizations. In addition to Heifer being blocked from meeting them in Lhasa, a local NGO in Qinghai that is an implementing partner for a Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) grant, reported that it has received clear instructions not to accept any more funding from TBF, which it has interpreted as an order to sever all relations. Rumors abound that TBF's status in the TAR is increasingly fragile.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: TBF has a record of surviving political storms remarkably well despite its strong ties to the Tibetan exile community in India. This is possibly explained by

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awareness among Chinese officials of its strong backing in the U.S. Congress and sensitivity to a potential international backlash if it is directly shut down. While organizations with strong U.S.-based backing have appeared to enjoy some increased staying power, many individual INGO contacts describe USAID or other USG funding as a kind of "NGO kryptonite." End Comment.

#### Similar Dynamics at Work in Sichuan's Tibetan Areas

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¶11. (C) While the difficulties faced by INGOs in the TAR seem to be particularly severe, post has noted similar dynamics at work in Sichuan's Tibetan prefectures of Aba and Ganzi. As reported in ref B, Ganzi officials issued instructions for strict control of all NGOs in late 2007. INGOs have had their access severely restricted in both prefectures since March 2008, with most unable to officially visit project sites beyond the main cities.

Contacts at one small INGO working on health-related projects in Ganzi told us they have not been able to visit their project sites since March 2008 and have redirected much of their efforts toward Sichuan earthquake recovery work. However, Winrock International has been able to maintain its offices in Kangding, Ganzi's largest town. A Tibetan Winrock employee there recently told PolEconoff that, after a long period of official delays, they are now moving forward with their health programs throughout the prefecture.

¶12. (C) Restrictions on foreign tourist travel in the Tibetan areas of western Sichuan, somewhat relaxed in recent months, may again be on the rise. Local officials insist that no such restrictions existed in the first place. (Note: Provincial Foreign Affairs Offices (FAOs) in the TAR, Sichuan, and Yunnan all denied our requests for official site visits to USAID-funded projects in Tibetan areas in April, June, and July respectively.

TAR and Sichuan FAOs both explained their denials by asserting that the relevant projects "have already ended"; the Yunnan FAO simply noted that "it is not convenient". End note.)

Comment: Operating Environment for INGO Worsens Since March 2008

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¶13. (C) While uncertainty, official obstruction, and sudden turns of fortune are not new phenomena for INGOs in the TAR, it is clear to us that the operating environment has significantly worsened since March 2008. Authorities still see some NGOs as filling roles that complement their priorities, and remain sensitive to the downsides of summarily ejecting organizations they view as less desirable. In our observation, official treatment of INGOs varies considerably depending on size, type of international support, and level of coordination with the local government. It seems authorities clearly would prefer a significantly reduced NGO presence that is both cooperative and easier to keep tabs on. End Comment.

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